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Section: National/Foreign

US , EGYPT RAIDS CAUGHT MILITANTS

Anthony Shadid, Globe Staff

WASHINGTON - US intelligence plucked one of Egypt's most wanted Islamic militants from Croatia in September 1995, spirited him to a ship in the Adriatic Sea for interrogation, and then turned him over to Egyptian authorities.

His family believes he was executed.

The operation - a tightly guarded secret that was confirmed by a former senior US official - was the most dramatic raid in a shadowy campaign waged by US and Egyptian intelligence to seize radicals operating in Europe in the 1990s.

It could also be an example of the kind of covert war that President Bush insists lies ahead.

In addition to the raid in Croatia, the two intelligence services delivered to US officials a militant who was jailed and then released in Greece and another traveling in West Africa. Islamic activists in Europe say the two agencies also seized at least 11 others in Albania and Azerbaijan who were sent to Egypt.

Those extraditions, which culminated in the late 1990s, are credited with playing a crucial role in ending Egypt's decade-long insurgency that claimed hundreds of lives, devastated its tourism industry, and threatened confidence in a government considered one of Washington's closest allies.

They point, too, to a longstanding alliance between Egypt and the US military and intelligence services that has drawn little attention but remains the most potent weapon in fighting Osama bin Laden's network, which in experience, training, and ideology bears a distinctly Egyptian stamp.

"The cooperation between our intelligence service and their intelligence service was very close, it was very frank, and it was very useful," said a former US

diplomat. Another former official, asked if the ties bore fruit, said: "The terrorism stopped in Egypt - that's pretty successful."

A US official described the tactic as legitimate.

"These are not abductions, these are renditions," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity. "If they are wanted by foreign governments and there is concern that they are involved in terrorist activities, the idea is to render them to justice."

A spokesman for the Central Intelligence Agency declined to comment.

Some officials and analysts point to that campaign in Europe, Africa, and other regions as a sign of what's to come as the United States formulates its own response to last month's attacks attributed to bin Laden and his network. The raids are risky, require intimate international cooperation, and often run roughshod over asylum protection, extradition law, and other civil liberties.

Because those raids were so bold - and have often led to questionable trials and the execution of at least two suspects - some human rights activists have criticized the campaigns for disregarding civil liberties. In addition, some Islamic insiders believe the success of the raids has inspired the enmity that drove bin Laden and his network against the United States.

"They delivered them to death," said Yasser al-Sirri, director of a human rights group with wide-ranging contacts in the Muslim world.

Sirri was sentenced to death in absentia by an Egyptian court for his alleged role in a 1993 assassination attempt on Egypt's prime minister in Cairo. He escaped and fled to Britain, where he remains despite repeated extradition attempts by Egyptian officials.

Among the Middle East's intelligence agencies, the Egyptian service, known in Arabic as mukhabarat, has enjoyed a formidable reputation for decades. Although less public and less celebrated than the Israeli Mossad, it remains appreciated by allies like the United States that count on an exchange of information and is feared by both violent and nonviolent Islamists, who have born the brunt of the Egyptian government's heavy-handed counterstrike.

What distinguishes it from services in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and even Iraq is its reach. With interests in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia, Egypt's intelligence operates networks across three continents, in addition to exhaustive internal intelligence that is only possible under an authoritarian government obsessed with security and stability.

While the United States publicly criticizes the Egyptian human rights record, it exploits the information their close relationship guarantees, particularly the Egyptians' ability to track the movement of Islamic militants abroad. That point was recently acknowledged by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell.

"Egypt, as you all know, is really ahead of us on this issue" of terrorism, Powell said after a meeting with the Egyptian foreign minister, Ahmed Maher, in

Washington. "They have had to deal with acts of terrorism in recent years, in the course of their own history. And we have much to learn from them, and there is much we can do together."

Put more bluntly by an Egyptian official: "We have have been so generous. We shared everything with the Americans."

Beginning in the mid-1990s, that relationship went beyond sharing, most notably in the effort to nab one of Egypt's most wanted suspects, Talaat Fouad Qassem.

Qassem, a fiery 38-year-old militant, was from a region of southern Egypt that has given rise to some of the country's most dangerous Islamists, and his record reads like an Islamist version of a soldier of fortune.

In 1982, he was jailed for seven years in Egypt, suspected of a role in the assassination of Anwar Sadat. He escaped during a prison transfer in 1989, and the odyssey that followed bore the hallmarks of a more infamous fellow traveler, Osama bin Laden. Like the Saudi exile, Qassem spent time in Pakistan, then joined the ranks of the Afghan mujahideen, who were fighting Soviet troops in the 1980s as part of one of the most extensive US covert efforts ever.

Those fighters from the Arab world became a kind of military reserve.

"Some have died in battle," he told an Egyptian human rights activist in 1993 in an interview published in Middle East Report, a Washington-based journal. "Others are being kept in Afghanistan to be sent, when the time is ripe, to Egypt. Some have already been sent and are under the leadership of military units."

By the early 1990s, he had emerged as a key leader and spokesman of al-Gamaa al-Islamiya, or the Islamic Group, which waged a bloody 10-year battle against an Egyptian government it believed was infidel because it failed to rule by strict Islamic law. Over those years, Qassem, whose nom de guerre was Abu Talal, was acquainted with a who's who of militant Islam, including Mohammed al-Islambuli, the brother of Sadat's assassin, and Ayman al-Zawahiri, considered by many intelligence officials to be the number two in bin Laden's growing network.

An Egyptian court sentenced Qassem to death in absentia in 1992 and pressured Pakistan, where he operated, to extradite him. He stayed one step ahead. He fled to Denmark, where he received asylum and soon took on a very visible presence as a preacher. His sermons at a Copenhagen mosque drew thousands, and he even appeared on a local television station on Saturdays.

Then he blundered.

Traveling under the name Ibrahim Izzat, he left for the Balkans, arriving in Croatia on Sept. 12, 1995, en route to Bosnia, where - his supporters said - he planned to write about the war there. He traveled with a translator, Ahmed al-Abd, who was living in Zagreb.

Qassem's time there was short.

Croatian police seized him from a Zagreb apartment the next day, jailed him,

then ordered him deported six days later for not registering with police upon his arrival, said Sirri, the Islamic activist, during a telephone interview from London.

It was the last his translator would see of him and, according to Croatian authorities at the time, their last knowledge of his whereabouts.

A former US official acknowledges now that was where US agents stepped in, spiriting him out of Croatia. Sirri, quoting sympathetic Egyptian sources, said he was questioned by US intelligence for two days aboard a US ship in the Adriatic Sea, specifically on reported threats that the Islamic Group planned to assassinate President Clinton. (US officials had frozen Qassem's assets by executive order in 1995.)

The US official confirmed that he was then turned over to Egyptian authorities. Sirri put the date of the hand-over at Sept. 22. Egyptian authorities have consistently refused to comment on his case, even to say whether he is dead or alive. Islamic activists at the time, however, said he was then taken to intelligence headquarters in the Nile delta town of al-Mansoura, and subsequently transferred to Cairo in early October 1995.

His wife, who was pregnant when he disappeared, said at the time that she believed he was killed.

"That was a very effective operation," the US official says.

It was also one of at least several staged during the 1990s.

Former US officials say Egyptian and US agents also cooperated in the extradition of Palestinian hijackers from Nigeria to the United States in 1993 and from Athens, via Cairo, to the United States in 1998.

Both of those operations were seen as successes, with little political fallout.

"It has to be clear-cut and it has to be a person who everyone agrees is dirty as hell," said one former US official.

Added another official, who was at the State Department during the 1993 extradition: "It's usually very difficult to find these people. They disappear in Lebanon, they change names or identities, and you lose track of them. But this guy we kept track of and found him and he made a mistake of traveling in places where we could actually access him. If they're traveling in Iran or Syria it would be a bit more problematic, but when you're dealing with a government that wants to be helpful then all sorts of things become possible."

Trickier were bigger and more far-reaching operations that took place in 1998, according to Sirri and other Islamic activists.

In Azerbaijan, where Arab veterans of the Afghan war went to fight in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian community inside Azerbaijan, US agents reportedly captured three Egyptians suspected of belonging to Egyptian Islamic Jihad. A faction of that group, led by Zawahiri, is now believed aligned with bin

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Laden. The men - Ihab Mohammed Saqr, Ahmed Salama Mabrouk, and Essam Mohammed Hafez Marzouq - all told their lawyers that US agents took part in the operation in late 1998.

In Albania, US agents helped capture suspected militants in summer 1998, some of whom were suspected of a plot to blow up the US Embassy in Tirana, Sirri said. Albanian sources quoted at the time said US agents took the men out of the country and interrogated them at length.

Lawyers at that 1999 trial said 13 suspects were handed over to Egyptian authorities. Two of the men - Ahmed Ibrahim al-Naggar and Ahmed Ismail Osman Salah - were sentenced to death and executed in February 2000.

Their extraditions were among more than 40 carried out over that time, mainly from Arab countries. The former US official put the number that US agents were involved in at less than a dozen.

"This is a dirty business," a high-ranking Egyptian official said.

And perhaps costly. Days before the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, Egyptian Islamic Jihad warned that it would retaliate against Americans "in a language they will understand" for the apprehension of its members.

Human rights activists, meanwhile, warn that disregarding protections will undermine the very freedoms the US government claims to uphold.

In countries like Egypt, "people will find themselves before military courts, in unfair trials, and tortured to say things they didn't do," said Hanny Megally, executive director of Human Rights Watch-Middle East.

The insurgency in Egypt, though, came to an end. After a massacre in 1998 of 58 tourists in Luxor, an Egyptian town with some of the world's greatest archeological treasures, Egypt saw its militant campaign end. Analysts credit a combination of repression - 20,000 detained, many without being charged - public disgust at the carnage, and, crucially, the extraditions.

The former US official says that those benefits outweigh the potential costs, and that such extraditions will remain a "technique that's available."

"It's a relatively modern phenomenon. There was a day when we would call it kidnapping," he said.

But he added: "These are not nice people. We're pretty much sure what they've done. Nobody's picking Joe Blow off the street here."

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